

HKU03x Humanity and Nature in Chinese Thought

Week 5: The Early Daoists – Hermits, Shen Dao, and Laozi

Section 4: Laozi: Tradition and text Theory

- 老子 Laozi is trying to improve what he likes about Shen Dào.
- Textual issue of Laozi - few Western scholars now believe he actually existed
 - Doubts date back to early modern period.
 - References to Laozi don't clearly emerge until *after* his supposed disciple, Zhuangzi.
 - No indications that Zhuangzi knew about Laozi - Laozi *explodes* on the scene after the death of Zhuangzi.
 - Archaeological finds confirm our doubts - the text was still being edited even at the end of the classical period.
- References to the text all start after Zhuangzi
 - Zhuangzi treats Lao Dan (Laozi) as a Confucian.
 - After Zhuangzi dies, his students write clever dialogues where Lao Dan (Laozi) lectures Confucius.
 - These dialogues portray Lao Dan as defending Zhuangzi's position and ridiculing Confucius.
 - The evolving text of the *Laozi* is then attributed to this Daoist oriented teacher of Confucius.
 - The anonymous authors use an old-fashioned poetry style in the text—making it similar to the very ancient *Book of Poetry*—one of the Confucian “classics”.
 - The history of philosophy in the *Zhuangzi* places Laozi between Shen Dao and Zhuangzi.
- We tend to use histories of philosophy to teach students philosophy—to introduce the current philosophical agenda
 - The *Zhuangzi* may have been doing that with the placement of Laozi.

HKU03x Humanity and Nature in Chinese Thought

- Both Laozi and Zhuangzi are critical of Shen Dao - his is a 道 *dào*^{path} for dead people and impossible to make coherent.
- Laozi wants the result - abandon knowledge- without the fatalistic 大道 *dà dào*^{great path} metaphysics.
- Laozi argues for 'abandon knowledge' in a different way - by treating knowledge as social domination of our behaviour
 - We want spontaneity and freedom from social control- that's why we should abandon knowledge.
 - Goal should be 自^{self}然 *zì rán*^{so} –typically translated as *naturalness*.
 - No argument from prescribing we follow 大道 *dà dào*^{great dao}.
- ... but does recommend following 天道 *tiān dào*^{natural guide}.